

Informal Nationalism after Communism: The Everyday Construction of Post-Socialist Identities. Abel Polese, Oleksandra Seliverstova, Emilia Pawłusz, and Jeremy Morris (eds.) London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018. 232 pp. Notes. Bibliography. £75.00/\$99.00, hard bound.

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Traditionally considered the realm of anthropological inquiry and ethnographic methodology, informality and ‘the everyday’ can be said to have recently experienced a boom in studies of nationalism and nation-building, which has, however, not necessarily led to the development of more insightful accounts of this realm of life. The collection *Informal Nationalism after Communism: The Everyday Construction of Post-Socialist Identities*, edited by Abel Polese and colleagues, has set out to advance the study of informal practices of everyday national identity building, enactment and renegotiation in a diverse set of post-socialist countries. Recognizing the importance of challenging the prevalence of state-centered approaches to the study of identities and nationalism in former socialist/Soviet societies, the editors instead advocate prioritizing the role of individuals in the (re-) production, interpretation and contestation of markers of national belonging. The book deserves recognition for the wide range of empirical contexts, methodological approaches and disciplinary orientations brought together. However, in light of its insufficient ethnographic depth and embedding within important debates on recent developments in the region, as well as its narrow and uncritical conceptualisation of ‘everyday’ nationalism, it ends up serving as another example of how elusive attempts to analyse everyday post-socialism empirically can be.

The main premise of this edited collection is that tacit, unnoticed and routinized performances of nationhood are not less significant for the process of nation-state building than governmental policies and official discourses. It is precisely the lack of certain activities, the non-reaction to certain upheavals, and the silent moments marking daily existence that can become the 'loudest' instruments for contestation of official ideologies of nationalism (4). The editors make the pertinent argument that qualitative methodologies are best suited for unearthing and scrutinizing the 'invisible' dimensions of identity construction and its affective, material and ideological expressions (10). The eight empirical chapters are organized into three thematic sections which aim to examine: 1) the role of educational institutions as platforms for the 'renegotiation and contestations' of statehood and identity categories; 2) the effects of portrayals of the nation in media production; and 3) the enactment and shaping of national identity in 'everyday' cultural practices. With its coverage of a variety of contexts ranging from the Western Balkans and Moldova to Russia and Mongolia and with the wide range of materials and sources analysed, the collection presents interesting ideas and possibilities for forging ahead with the study of post-socialist everyday nationalism.

At the same time, the research presented barely reaches the empirical depth and perspective that would allow for the uncovering of the 'everyday' and 'invisible' processes and practices – a task that the editors set for themselves in the Introduction (11-12). The larger part of the chapters examines textual and visual material like school textbooks (Chapter 3), corporate advertisements and branding (Chapter 4), restaurant menus (Chapter 6) or general public and social media discourses (Chapter 5) and thus prioritizes (semi-) formal and institutional expressions of nationalism over the everyday ones. For example, in Chapter 3, Tamara Trošt investigates expressions of nationalism in Serbian and Croatian textbooks in geography, nature and sports. Beyond the unsurprising conclusion that the centralised national curriculum transmits established national symbols and ideologies, her claim that school textbooks can also

be considered ‘sites for contestation’ is not further explored or substantiated by considering, for instance, the reception and negotiation of the materials by teachers and pupils.

Half of the collection’s chapters approach the topic with a mix of interviews and at least some kind of participatory observation. However, especially in the case of Rayna Gavrilova’s (Chapter 6) and Timofey Agarin and Līga Rudzīte’s (Chapters 8) the high degree of synthetization and interpretation of data takes over more in-depth descriptions of contextual and procedural details and leaves room for alternative interpretations of the observed realities. Agarin and Rudzīte, for instance, cite interviews ‘conducted with an international development organisation’ (170) on merely one occasion while not providing further details on how their three months of fieldwork in several places feed into their generally compelling narrative.

Despite their stated intention to reveal particularities of regional dynamics of informal nationhood ‘idiosyncratic to the post-socialist region’ (184), the case studies presented are insufficiently, or at least not systematically enough, contextualized within trajectories of post-socialist neoliberal transformation and the political economies of nationalist consumerism that have emerged from them (especially Chapters 3, 6 and 7).

A more thorough contextualization could also have appreciated the rise of nationalist rhetoric, social movements and political parties, as well as increasingly authoritarian tendencies across the post-socialist region and globally. The racist and exclusionary language and sentiments that have become part of the everyday in post-socialist countries can hardly be dismissed as deviant or pathological expressions of nationalism but merit scrutiny as part of a more widely-defined inquiry into banal nationalisms. Elizaveta Gaufman’s analysis in Chapter 5 points in this direction, as it reveals how homophobic, heteronormative and exclusionary discourses are part of Russian social media users’ attempts to define their national belonging, identification and subjectivity.

With its analytical restriction to a narrow, if not sanitized version of ‘banal’ nationalism, the collection creates the impression that national identities can somehow be extricated from the more regressive and violent dynamics and practices of nation-building. Banal forms of nationalism are thus portrayed as voluntaristic and possibly emancipatory forms of self-determination or even expressions of agency (9; Chapters 1, 2, 5), which have the potential to contest top-down nation-building projects. However, as Michael Billig (*Banal Nationalism*, Sage, 1995), whose work builds a cornerstone of the volume’s approach, has admonished, banal forms of nationalism should not be mistaken as benign ones, let alone, as Hannah Arendt noted (*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Viking Press, 1963), as harmless ones.

Instead, banal nationalism has to be scrutinized for its complicity and inextricable symbiosis with the more violent and exclusionary practices of nation-building. The problematic nature of this analytical choice is hinted at in Gaufman’s and Agarin and Rudzīte’s chapters (5 and 8) and becomes most obvious in Dilyara Suleymanova’s contribution (Chapter 1), which investigates the strategies of minority ethnic pupils in the Republic of Tatarstan to renegotiate, and at times to outrightly deny, their ethnic belonging in favour of a self-identification as part of the Russian ethnicity conceived of in a wide sense. Yet the author fails to appreciate the coercion and symbolic violence lingering behind such reconfiguring of one’s identity.

In summary, while it points to valuable entry points and important aspects of the study of informal and everyday identity and nation-building processes, this collection ultimately falls short of its own ambition to provide a substantive – presumably ethnographically informed – analysis of the latter.